

# **Ardent Resources**

## **Comedy in Performance (text version)**

**Written by Dan Ward-Nixon**

Dan Ward-Nixon started performing comedy whilst in his hometown of Birmingham at 11 years old! As a child Dan attended the Central TV Workshop in Birmingham, and appeared in many TV, Stage and Radio productions where his passion for comedy was realised. He moved to London and studied Drama at Greenwich University, where he also continued to perform stand-up comedy, and make documentaries about comedy. Dan is currently a stand-up comedian on the London circuit and regular MC at comedy nights. He is also a comedy writer for other comedians, and has helped write Edinburgh Fringe shows, as well as making his directorial debut next year! He also teaches a comedy in performance course, and continues to direct comedy content in front of camera, with his recent sketches being shown on BT Sport.

### **ABOUT**

ARDENT RESOURCES is a collection of workshop notes, interviews, guidance and tips about working in Theatre. It is not intended as comprehensive advice or formal educational resource on which reliance should be placed; rather it collates various insights from people working in the industry that you can choose to incorporate into your own toolkit. Nothing should be taken as a representation or warranty as the correctness or fitness for purpose of any of the content.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

To make an audience laugh is a one of life's true joys! Via our performances as actors, we connect to the audience through the emotions we convey using our delivery of the script, our physicality and actions, and our reactions. This is true on stage, screen or radio. We do

this to invoke an emotional response. The compulsion to laugh is as subliminal as breathing. Being able to trigger humour, the purist emotional response an audience member can give, is far the most rewarding accolade for an actor.

Please use the subsequent guide, as a tool to help you navigate the many different styles of comedic performance for both stage and screen... and remember TO HAVE FUN!

## **STAGE OR SCREEN**

When performing in a role in any given comedic genre, the audience, and how they affect the performance, is an essential factor to be taken into consideration. When performing a comedic role on screen, the audience's responses must be assumed, as the audience, and their reactions, are not there for the performance. The audience see the finished, polished article. Some may see screen comedy acting as less demanding on the performer, as the scenes can be rehearsed, shot and re-shot as necessary. This is not necessarily true as comedy performers we gauge our performance, and make adjustments accordingly, against the reaction of a live audience.

If we compare a performance of a comedy on screen, to the same on stage, the immediacy of the audience's reaction will have an effect on the delivery of the performance. Obviously, we must project our voices more on stage to be heard, but we must also exaggerate actions as the nuances which can be shown in close detail on screen, may be lost on stage with a live audience.

The pacing of material is another important distinction to be made in these two disciplines. Stage actors must be prepared for laughs to interrupt the "natural flow" of conversational discourse in a performance. We must be aware that the delivery of the given lines, or actions, and the ensuing laughter, shall have an effect of the dialogue and actions on stage. In other words, if they are laughing, wait for them to finish!

Adversely the same is true when the audience reaction is less favourable. If we expect a laugh, and the audience do not respond, carry on and keep going if that is what the genre expects (highbrow, black comedies etc – see *glossary of comedic genres*). However, what makes performing comedy on stage so exhilarating is, if the genre allows it (Parody, Slapstick, Farce – see *glossary of comedic genres*), we can address these variables in audience reactions directly by breaking the

4<sup>th</sup> wall, which, when done successfully, adds another dimension to the performance. An example of this is seen to hilarious effect in “*The Play That Goes Wrong*”.

## **DECIDE ON THE RULES, AND STICK TO THEM!**

Both on stage and on screen we create worlds, and subsequent rules, which can allow a comedic performance to be totally bonkers, surreal, absurd or be based in realism, awkwardness and truth, but whatever world we create and decide to perform within, **DECIDE ON THE RULES AND STICK TO THEM!** This is true to both screen and stage performances.

We create heterotopias in comedy. Worlds in which the audience exists for the length of the performance. We obey the rules of this world by our chosen performance style.

Highbrow comedies such as Tom Stoppard’s “*Arcadia*” are based in fact. In a world which exists, using society and its rules to set the play. Directors utilise naturalistic performance styles to underline the “realness” of the world where the action is taking place. We know this world, as it’s “real” so all the comedy, and the performances, must subscribe to this “real world” allowing the humour to come from the dialogue, and the situations which occur within.

Surreal and absurdist comedies need to set a world where the play and performances are based first, and then follow the rules created. These rules can be anything you want but including the audience in these worlds and rules, allows a deeper connection. To allow the audience into this made-up world, and rules, allow a greater freedom for you the actor, to include any mistakes or performance variables to become part of the performance if you so wish. This is, in my opinion, is the best factor in comedic roles. It allows you, the actor to become more comfortable and really utilise your creativity to carve a character which is not constrained by the rules of dramaturgy, and connect with the audience for the duration of the performance. Break the 4<sup>th</sup> wall and address the audience if the rules allow! Include them! They will love it!

To put this into context, if during “*Arcadia*” an actor makes a mistake with their lines, you must ignore this mistake and carry on, as highlighting the error would cause the audience to break from the world they are in. If during an absurdist or surreal comedy, you make a mistake, you have the freedom to ad-lib and address the mistake, in

character, and make the mistake part of the show. This will allow the audience to be more emotionally invested as they feel part of the in-joke, and part of a unique performance that shan't happen anywhere else ever again.

There is a type of genre that sews these two together; farcical comedies. These are set in the real world, but are intentionally not following the rules of society. The audience are aware and familiar to the world the action is taking place, but are also aware the rules being obeyed on stage are not "normal" thus making all the action in the play farcical as they know this wouldn't happen in the "real world". An example of farcical performances on screen can be found in the film "Movie 43". (To make things a little trickier, in farcical comedies, these worlds and rules can also be inverted, so that *real* rules apply to *absurd* worlds. A great example of this is the animated film "The Bee Movie")

### **KEEP IT FRESH, AND BE PRESENT!**

Whether it is the 18<sup>th</sup> take on set after a tiring day, or on a matinee performance on stage after a 12-week show-run, make every performance fresh and make every time you have delivered that punchline as lively as the 1<sup>st</sup> time you performed it.

Audiences are willing to go on any journey you want to take them on and are wanting to be entertained, so treat them with respect in your performance. An audience can tell if a joke is stale (you've told it a million times and it's not hitting anymore) or if you're dialling in a performance, so be present and give it your all!

On Stage, every performance will be slightly different in some way, be that in performance, or maybe audience reaction, but that is what we live for! These moments that we share with the audience that shall never happen again. Tomorrow you may be the same actors, saying the same words, in the same place, doing the same actions, but due to the audience and your interactions with them, it shall be unique. Comedy is a vehicle for human connection, and you are the drivers, now DRIVE!

### **TIPS**

- **Be present, be yourself!** – *This obviously goes for any performance but particularly comedic roles, the importance of being present whilst performing comedy is essential. Also know it is YOU in the role, so be YOU in that role!*

- **Respect your audience, they will tell you if it's funny** – *The acid test for any comedy production is putting it in front of an audience. If they laugh it's funny. Try performing Works in Progress (WIP) if you are devising a comedy piece to gauge the laughs and be prepared to alter as necessary.*
- **Know your script** – *performing comedy can be like musical theatre in that there is a rhythm to the jokes and dialogue. Take your time to really study the text and how you delivery it. Is the writer using the rule of 3 (where the punchline is on the third beat) or using a pull back and return (where a punchline is totally unexpected, "a curve ball"); work with your director to understand the text and rhythm. Once you know the rhythm, then you can add to it, (like jazz, comedy jazz!)*
- **Rehearse, rehearse REHEARSE!** – *The rehearsal period is very important in comedy. During this time, we can experiment with characterisations, the delivery of the script, acting style but maybe more important for the cast to bond! Try to make each other laugh! A tight cast makes for a hilarious comedy!*
- **Experiment in rehearsal** – *Whilst reading and in rehearsal, try out different incarnations of your character! Go for it and then dial it back as necessary. Work with the director to hone their and your vision.*
- **It's comedy, so have fun!** – *Comedy can be serious business, dealing with some serious issue, but remember to have fun!*
- **Respect the writer, but trust yourself** – *The writer has written the script in that order for a reason. Obeying comedic structures and rhythms is an essential part of comedy writing, but as actors it is our job to accurately portray their words with our own characterisation. It is important to work with the director and to know your script well, so any comedic rules are adhered to (rule of 3 etc) but also know your instinct of what is funny! Sometimes a reactionary look, or a sound at the right place is all a text needs to elevate it from funny, to hilarious. That's what you bring!*
- **You are funny, believe me!** – *A lot of people say "oh I couldn't do comedy, I'm just not funny!" to which I say poppycock! We are all funny! You are funny! Find YOUR funny playing with the character and script and believe in yourself!*

## **GLOSSARY OF COMEDIC GENRES**

**Low Comedy** requires little skill in the scripting (if there is a script at all). Often a visual or highly physical work.

**Slapstick** is knockabout, physical humour. Media examples include *The Three Stooges*, *The Marx Bros*, *Laurel and Hardy* and *Mr Bean*.

**Farce** involves ridiculous, improbable situations. Media examples include *Fawlty Towers* and *Monty Python*.

**Satire** is comedy that sends up people and events, ridiculing and mocking weaknesses to create the humour.

**Parody** is similar to satire as it is a work that deliberately imitates another work for comic effect, sometimes delivering a message. See YouTube for many examples of parodies of contemporary people and world events.

**Stand-up** is a type of comedy normally involving one person performing a comic routine before a live audience.

**Revue / Variety Show / Vaudeville** typically involve a collection of songs, sketches, dances etc. into a single show. Sometimes related subject matter, though often not.

**Black Comedy / Black Humour** is humour that makes fun of serious subject matter such as death and religion. Offensive to some, hilarious to others. Requires intelligent scripting.

**Commedia dell'arte** is historical, improvised physical comedy, originating in Italy around the year 1550. Arlecchino the harlequin servant made it famous!

**Burlesque** requires discretion when studying this form with students. Focus on the origins of burlesque in England as satirical comedies.

**Travesty** is a work that misrepresents serious subject matter via parody.

**Tragicomedy** as the name suggests is a work comprising a mixture of both comedy and tragedy. Samuel Beckett's absurdist play *Waiting for Godot* is a classic example.

**High Comedy** is intellectual (normally literary) comedy works displaying a sophisticated wit, such as Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

**Comedy of Manners** are literary, artistic works comprising sophisticated society satires. From 1660 to about 1700, these plays were also known as Restoration comedies (William Wycherley, etc.). The form was later revived in the 1770s (Richard Sheridan, Oliver Goldsmith) and then again in the 1890s (Oscar Wilde).

**Theatre of the Absurd** The insertion and detection of various forms of comedy (vaudeville, physical comedy, etc.) in absurdist plays requires a solid understanding of the form. Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* is a fine example.

**Romantic Comedy** is comedy involving love and romance. Many of Shakespeare's comedies are romantic comedies.

**Musical Comedy** Musical theatre is mostly (not always) comic in some way, hence light-hearted and appealing to the masses.

**This resource was written by Dan Ward-Nixon.**

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www.ardenttheatre.co.uk  
contact@ardenttheatre.co.uk  
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